

# BT Cruisers - A Run for recovery

Each year, the Los Angeles Police Revolver and Athletic Club sponsors a relay race for law

*By John Dawson*

enforcement officials, starting in Baker and ending in Las Vegas, NV. Formally titled the Challenge Cup Relay, most everyone involved calls it the Baker2Vegas. The 2004 relay had 211 teams participating in this grueling test of physical stamina, endurance and team work.

For the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wardens and their federal counterparts with the U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the relay became a run for recovery in support of one of their own as they each took one leg of the race.

The race legs vary from about 5 miles to over 8 miles in length. The course goes over two mountain ranges and reaches an elevation of more than 5,000 feet. Weather conditions can run the entire gamut, from broiling heat to snow. Dust storms and dry winds are very common too. Each team has a support team which operates the follow car which follows behind each runner for the safety. Runners run day and night, moving the aluminum baton along the course until it has traveled the 120 miles from Baker to Las Vegas.

The DFG team dedicated their effort to one of their former co-workers, Bruce Toloski, who had been a Fish and Game Warden for California for 10 years. He promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, and then moved on to become a USFWS Special Agent when his life changed.

On April 11, 2003, Toloski was returning from Las Vegas, where he had gone to interview a suspect. As he returned to Southern California, he was driving on the Long Beach Freeway (Highway 710) when he saw an overturned Jeep which had been involved in a single car accident. The driver of the Jeep was trapped inside the vehicle. Toloski stopped and quickly extricated the injured driver, but before they could



*Photos courtesy of John Dawson*



**Clockwise starting top left: Bruce Toloski after release from hospital; BT Cruiser follow car; Toloski during race, and Toloski at the starting line.**

safely get away from the accident site, an intoxicated driver struck the overturned Jeep. Toloski was struck in the head by flying debris from the collision. He sustained massive head injuries and was quickly transported to the St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood. Emergency personnel worked feverishly but Toloski was not expected to live. He did, though remained in a coma.

Again, predictions were dire, but in the weeks that passed Toloski battled back, eventually emerging from the coma and leaving the hospital. As Toloski recovered, his fellow game wardens, both federal and state officers, visited with him often. They landscaped his yard which had been a project Toloski was working on before the accident, talked with him about the past to help his memory, and worked with him to help him walk again. They wanted to do more.

As the Fish and Game Warden team was formed, they dedicated their effort as a fund raiser for Toloski. They named themselves the BT Cruisers (the BT in honor of Bruce Toloski), and received permission from the Challenge Cup Rules Committee to wear bib number 583 which was Toloski's federal badge number. Officers from both the USFWS and DFG worked to gather pledges (which ranged from \$5 to \$500).

The team captain contacted the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officer's Association and advised them of their efforts to help Toloski. Wardens from as far away as South Dakota, New York, Vermont, Colorado, Utah, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Arizona pledged the event. Several different state officers associations sent in sizable contributions. Other donations were sent in by individual game wardens who might have known Toloski from having traded patches with him.

Toloski was an avid patch collector, with samples from fish and wildlife agencies from around the world. In a show of solidarity, Toloski, with the help of his wife Lisa, placed those department patches on a banner that hung on the side of the follow vehicle. The Toloskis further modified the banner by placing a star with the first name of each runner who was running in the 120-mile race.



The BT Cruisers.

In November 2003, the race committee gave permission for Toloski to participate symbolically with the first and last runner of the BT Cruisers. Larry Farrington, first runner, was Toloski's USFWS. Roy Griffith, the last runner, was a DFG warden and good friend of Toloski. They had worked together in apprehending reptile poachers in the Southern California deserts during Toloski's 10 years with DFG.

When Toloski was approached with the idea of participating, he had been unable to run, and it had been decided that a short walk would be just as good. However, for Toloski, the invitation for the symbolic run became a challenge, and he began to work in earnest with his physical therapist. He was determined to be able to run, if only a short distance, by April 2004.

On April 24, 2004 at 5 p.m. dozens of runners assembled in the California desert at the starting line for the start of the race. The temperature was 95 degrees in the shade. Toloski was introduced to everyone and identified as a hero for having assisted a trapped motorist and becoming a victim to a traumatic head injury. Toloski and Farrington were given a minute head start over the rest of the field. At the sound of the gun, Toloski took off, leaving Farrington in the dust. Some 50 yards into the race course were two members of the BT CRUISERS who were there to catch Toloski and lead him back to the starting line, but he raced right past them. Toloski had worked hard in physical therapy for this moment and he was not going to stop until he met his Challenge. After running over 200 yards, he was exhausted and stopped. He was led back to the starting line with his arms raised over his head and wearing a

huge smile.

It was now up to the BT CRUISERS to carry the baton and complete the 120 miles. Throughout the night, across dry lake beds, through Pahrump and Shoshone in Nevada, and over mountain passes, wardens carried the baton along in a team effort to cover 120 miles.

On Sunday morning the sun rose and with it, the temperature. It quickly got hot again. Many runners were overcome with heat exhaustion, and 19 runners from various teams were taken

by helicopter over the grueling two day event.

Eventually, the BT Cruisers passed the baton to Griffith, a mere 5.2 miles from the finish line at the Silverton. As Griffith approached the finish line, he was joined by Toloski who took the baton from Griffith and charged towards the finish line with Griffith alongside. As Toloski crossed the finish line, the announcer addressed the thousands in attendance stating that not only had Toloski met his challenge but he had been selected to receive a Heroism Award from the Federal Law Enforcement Officers.

Overall, the BT CRUISERS finished way back in the pack when you look at the overall finish of the 211 teams. The San Diego Police Department won the Challenge with a time of 13:29:55.

But the members of the BT Cruisers didn't need the Challenge Cup to feel like winners. In addition to helping Toloski meet his challenge, the BT Cruisers raised more than \$7,300 to assist Toloski whose medical needs continue and whose leave time has been exhausted. In addition to the heroism award, Toloski was recognized in Orlando in June of 2004.

More than 19 months following the accident, Toloski, now 37, continues to face challenges in his recovery and in other areas of his life. He and his wife Lisa have a new set of twins to fill their lives. Life has also changed for the drunk driver who hit Toloski. He was convicted in June of this year for his third DUI and will be serving five years in prison. 🐘

*John Dawson is a DFG warden. Contributions for Bruce Toloski can still be sent in to the BT CRUISERS at Premier West Bank, PO Box 1087 Yreka, CA. 96097*